

BLM News

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BLM Raises Concerns of Erosion from Driving on Water-Soaked Roads

CAPTION (Dsc00015) – Driving on saturated natural-surface roads pushes a vehicle's tires deep into the softened surface, creating small gullies that collect rain and snowmelt. Water flowing in the gullies washes soils away, creating deeper gullies until a section washes out and makes the road impassable.

Elk-shed collectors and others, who drive on water-saturated dirt roads, or off the established roads and trails, are steering the habitat toward disaster, cautions a manager for the Bureau of Land Management.

"They start the erosion process, and spread invasive plants and noxious weeds," Fred Fisher, support services manager for the BLM Ely District, said yesterday.

Fisher said driving on saturated natural-surface roads pushes a vehicle's tires deep into the softened surface, creating small gullies that collect rain and snowmelt. Water flowing in the gullies washes soils away, creating deeper gullies until a section washes out and makes the road impassable.

"...And people drive around the wash-out and start a new road, which begins the erosion process all over again."

Driving off established roads and trails also causes erosion, and for the same reason. The practice also crushes desirable native vegetation and breaks-up the soil's crust, preparing it for invasion by non-desirable and non-native invasive plant species, and noxious weeds, such as cheatgrass and halogeton. These aggressive species thrive in disturbed soils, pushing out beneficial native vegetation.

Fisher said a healthy watershed has an adequate cover of perennial native plants, particularly herbs and grasses that grow between sagebrush and other shrubs. These plants and microscopic organisms in the soil crust help to retain soil and water, as well as provide food and habitat for wildlife.

To protect watershed health and provide for the wildlife, Fisher encouraged collectors and other public lands users to keep their vehicles on existing roads and trails.

"...And steer away from water-saturated roads."

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